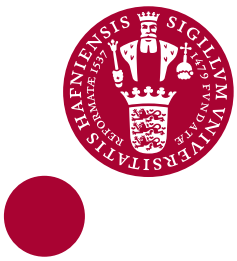

Trajectories of the Common Man's Party

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Luisa Steur

TRAJECTORIES OF THE COMMON MAN'S PARTY

November 3, 2014

> *"Mr. Ambani, you are one of the richest persons in this country where majority of the population does not get to eat two square meals in a day. Does your greed for money know no end? Why do you have to indulge in illegal activities to make money when you can do good business without such activities?"*

Those are the words of Prashant Bhushan, member of the national executive of India's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)—Common Man's Party—in an open letter (dated 23 July 2014) to Anil Ambani, chairman of the Reliance Group and potentially the richest man in India if it weren't for his brother Mukesh Ambani, worth $20 billion and famous for having built Antilia, the world's most expensive personal residential property that towers over Mumbai's squalor almost as a symbol of "the succession of the middle and upper classes into outer space" (Roy 2012). Prashant is clearly walking a tightrope: he is invoking outrage at the contrast between the wealth of the Ambani brothers and the poverty in which most ordinary Indians live but is keen to temper his criticism to target only the wealth that has been "illegally" made and that is evidence of excessive "greed." "Crony capitalism" and "corruption" are the vices that the AAP has set itself the task of combating, in favor of "good business," proper and legal capitalism. Like any populist party, AAP leaders tend to avoid too explicitly leftist or rightist rhetoric, instead holding the two together in often-uneasy tension.

Predictably, then, the populist ambiguity of the party has split opinions among critical scholars of India between those who insist on the need to think with the AAP as an emerging popular-leftist or subaltern breakthrough into the status quo of Indian politics (e.g., Menon and Nigam 2011; Nigam 2014; Singh 2014; Visvanathan 2014; Zabiliute 2014a—hesitantly, also Chakrabarti and Dhar 2014 and even Giri 2014) and those who criticize it as a party heavily dominated by elite urban "middle-class," as well as upper-caste and male, concerns and hence implicitly right-wing (see Baxi 2014; Chatterjee 2011; Illaiah 2014; Patnaik 2014; Roy 2014; Sharma 2012; Sonpimple 2014). Most academic commentators—myself here included—base their impressions of the AAP on news reports, election statistics, and social media discussions combined with brief observations of the AAP in action as it happens to emerge in their field sites or personal surroundings. Srila Roy's *Economic and Political Weekly* article "Being the change" (2014) stands out

as the first actual ethnographic account of the AAP. What Roy and most scholarly commentators I've read share, however, is a focus on the most visible, urban, "middle-class" face of the AAP. The focus on the "middle-class" face of the AAP is logical, perhaps, as this is where the party's origins lie in Delhi. In the run-up to the 2014 national elections, however, the AAP formed a new alliance that resulted in the active involvement of leaders of some of the most influential "people's movements" and rural nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in India. This development has received little attention from academic commentators but happens to have been quite visible to me as I was in contact with some of these NGO/people's movement leaders as a result of fieldwork on Dalit civil society activism in South India.

Taking this "people's movements" trajectory in the AAP into account, as I intend to do in this short paper, lends some support to unsettling views of the AAP as predominantly "middle-class," and essentially rightist, in character. For whereas for instance Facebook discussions of the AAP's anti–money laundering campaigns, such as Bhushan's complaint against Anil Ambani, are full of frustrated engineering students bemoaning why Indian companies cannot act like great philanthropic, employment-and-wealth-creating companies such as Google or Microsoft, one gets a very different interpretation of the issue from someone like Christina Swamy, another member of the national executive of the AAP and formerly the program coordinator of a rural development NGO in Tamil Nadu. In my interview with her, Christina was keen to emphasize the outlandish amount of money stacked away by Indian politicians in Swiss bank accounts and compare it to what this could have meant for the average citizen: "Imagine…it's bigger than a year's country budget! And from where they got this money? It is all from the people." Hence whereas the "middle classes" (mostly an ideological category) are concerned with emphasizing the essential goodness of capitalism if only it would get rid of its corrupt excesses in India—corruption and commonness defined as moral trespassing and abnormalcy—Swamy is more concerned with criticizing the huge disparities in wealth that have led to the impoverishment of large sections of the Indian population: corruption defined as theft from the people and commonness as referring to the impoverished and excluded masses. To give due attention to this second tendency within the AAP, then, I will in the following discuss the two broad currents—that of the "middle class" and that of the "people's movements"—in more detail, sketching their underlying class trajectories, their immediate political predecessors, and their typical political style and ideological perspective. I'll end the paper, then, with a few reflections on the effect of the NGOs/peo-

litical hegemony in India more generally.

The "middle-class" trajectory

There is a lot to be said about the "empty sign of the middle-class" (Kalb 2014), but this is not the place. Let me emphasize merely that in designating the initial trajectory of the AAP as "middle-class," I am not referring primarily to a sociological or statistical reality but to an emic marker of identification and ideology. For suffice to say that with ongoing neoliberal statistical tinkering, ever-larger portions of the Indian population are falling into this middle class while ideologically (as I use it here) it actually stands for everything these petty street vendors, slum dwellers, rickshaw drivers, and marginal peasants are deemed *not* to be: educated and technologically savvy, non-opportunistic, and capable of sacrifice, cosmopolitan but temperate in their consumption practices.

Key to sketching the historical context of this "middle-class" current within the AAP is the demise of the developmental state in India. Where the largely upper-caste middle class of the post-Independence period was bolstered by sustained government investment in higher education and civil service employment, this gradually started to change from the 1960s. Lower castes attained an ever-stronger presence in the political field, in higher educational institutions, and in government bureaucracy, prompting this "middle class" to rally against government "reservation" policies (affirmative action for lower castes) and to start considering politics as a plebeian field of unprincipled pragmatism, corruption, and greed (Jaffrelot 2003). Many members of this middle class migrated to the United Kingdom and the United States, from where they, however, remained heavily invested in domestic politics in India—including in the AAP (Roy 2014: 49). As these processes intensified during the 1980s and GDP growth took off with the liberalization policies of the early '90s, the "middle class," then, became further pitted *against* the Indian state, which it started to consider an obstacle on the way to enrichment through private sector employment and the neoliberal promise of "Shining India" (Khandekar and Reddy 2014:5).

This is the broad-brush historical background to the immediate predecessor of the AAP, namely the Anna Hazare craze that had Delhi in its spell in the summer of 2011. The Anna Hazare movement had strongly reactionary elements to it—for instance, the Youth for Equality mobilization that in name of meritocracy and, indeed, anticorruption, and in a mode of hysterical upper-caste self-pity, agitates against reservations for Dalits and lower castes in education and civil service. However, in the months preceding the summer of 2011, a number of shockingly

related to the action of mobile frequencies and the Commonwealth Games Scam among them—came to light and, with this, an initiative called "India Against Corruption" could shift middle-class anger more decidedly toward the super-rich (rather than toward Dalits and backward castes). "Team Anna," as the group of people around Anna Hazare came to be known, channeled the shock at the scale of these scams into an angry resentment with corrupt politicians and all-out rejection of politics. A key member of Team Anna was Arvind Kejriwal—earlier, in fact, also a prominent Youth for Equality leader—who later went on to found the AAP. Indeed, if "Anna" ("father") Hazare, an old Gandhian from Maharashtra with an incorruptible, ethical reputation, was the public face of the well-oiled and well-funded campaign, it was generally considered that Kejriwal, a one-time Indian Revenue Service officer-turned-civic-activist, was the "brains" behind the Anna Hazare campaign. What struck me when, in that summer of 2011, I visited the Ramlila Ground where Anna was doing his symbolic public hunger fast to pressure the Indian government into adopting an anticorruption Citizen's Ombudsman bill, was how much these grounds, where literally hundreds of thousands of people passed, felt like a combination of a professionally run mega-festival—complete with fenced queuing and X-ray screening of visitors' bags—and a media spectacle, where TV channels had their roaring generators, spotlights, and glamorous journalists set up to broadcast nonstop, live from Ramlila. This was not your typical unruly Indian popular festival—indeed, the "professionalism" was palpable everywhere from the campaign slogans that seemed to be taken straight from the global advertising world ("I am Anna" the most prominent one)—to the Anna merchandise and of course the sea of disposable white Gandhi *topis* offered to visitors to wear.

The issue over which Kejriwal split with Anna at the end of the Anna Hazare campaign was supposedly over the question of whether to become "political." The message of the Anna Hazare movement had been that all politics was dirty and that only a parallel legal structure could restore India's ethical reputation. Kejriwal hardly opposed this message but indeed claimed that the AAP would be an anti-system party; it would, in his words "look like a political party but not behave like a political party." In much of AAP rhetoric, a self-righteous anger reverberates at the fact that politics in India seems to refuse to be remade in the self-image of the middle class, imagined as the value embodiment of "normal," "good" capitalism—the rhetoric often exhibits perfectly the shift from "nation building to nation branding" that post-reform India seems to have been going through (Kaur 2012). Srirupa Roy's ethnographic work on the party building of the AAP in Delhi com-

ers. According to Roy, the success of the AAP in its initial stage has relied on "offering tens of thousands of individuals with spaces and opportunities to establish their uniqueness or distinction as effective, and new, political subjects" (2014: 50). AAP activism offers a great opportunity for the many readers of popular-science economics books in India to practice their imagined managerial/CEO selves: party workers use meetings to exhort business management maxims and practice their "management speak" in discussing public expenditure overviews (Roy 2014: 50). A deeply engrained practicality also pervades here, and direct "problem solving" simply through educating people on their legal rights or reviving defunct democratic mechanisms is believed to provide simple solutions to complex problems (Roy 2014: 48ff). AAP candidates, moreover, are likely to engage in what Roy calls "performances of political reluctance and renunciation"—the continued ethical and principled distancing from "dirty politics" (2014: 50). That the "middle class" has an advantage here is obvious as the way the principled—as opposed to "opportunistic"—nature of AAP activism is emphasized by narrating the wealthy background of AAP activists that allows for sacrifice in the first place. The upper-caste advantage is also obvious: as with Anna Hazare's symbolic fast, the ritualized, *ennobling* "sacrifice" can only really be made by someone who embodies upper-caste confidence and purity (Blom Hansen 2014).

This "middle-class" set of practices and values strongly determined the AAP at the moment it started campaigning for the 2012 Delhi elections and had the passing of the anticorruption Ombudsman bill as its overriding priority. As Matthew Jenkins (2014) argues, self-proclaimed a-political anticorruption narratives have historically been important elements in political struggle in India, but with the consolidation of a neoliberal conception of corruption, today's anticorruption discourse is dominated by a middle-class politics of discrediting the political class and the poor. The AAP's emphasis on anticorruption today hence potentially aligns it particularly with the professional middle class. In time, the AAP has, however, gone through a similar transformation as that of Parivartan, the Delhi-based civic association that Arvind Kejriwal founded in 2000 with a group of retired professionals and civil servants. As Rob Jenkins (2007) points out, Parivartan originally focused on quintessentially "middle-class" issues, its first campaign targeting corruption in the income-tax bureaucracy: a campaign to help the relatively wealthy deal with the bribes they were asked to pay by tax officials by mobilizing well-connected friends within the tax department. Within two years, however, Parivartan started to address issues of more widespread concern, notably the corruption-induced problems within Delhi's municipal electricity grid (Jenkins 2007:

Act and other official-redress mechanisms to combat police harassment of street vendors, illegal slum-clearance drives, and irregularities in the supply of subsidized food.

Similarly, the AAP soon realized that the Ombudsman bill and the moral-ethical posturing of its leadership were not speaking to the many poor and lower-caste people whom the AAP also claimed to represent and whose votes it sought. Kancha Illaiah, a prominent lower-caste intellectual, for instance, publicly mocked the AAP's election symbol of the broom (*jhadoo*), enthusiastically brandished by AAP supporters to "sweep away corruption," writing that was ironic to see "men who would certainly not like to be seen wielding *jhadoos* at home, brandishing brooms in public like trophies" (2014). That ethical vigilance could get badly out of hand, moreover, became clear when Kejriwal's law minister in January 2014, together with a mob of AAP supporters, raided the homes of African women suspected of prostitution in protest at the local police inaction—indeed "sexual corruption"—despite complaints from residents (see Baxi 2014). This backfired as many liberal and leftist erstwhile sympathizers of the AAP interpreted it as a xenophobic and potentially fascist act. The AAP leadership seems to have realized that it could get a much broader appeal by concentrating on its promise to halve electricity bills, especially for those using only little electricity, and to provide a daily quota of free water—two major costs of living that the poor struggle with in Delhi. Arvind Kejriwal's principled resignation as chief minister of Delhi after forty-eight days in power, as it became clear the Ombudsman bill would not be passed any time soon, was still mostly catering to "middle-class" values, but it backfired on both fronts: first because it was easily interpreted by the "middle class" as an electoral strategy (eyeing the upcoming national elections) and hence dirty politics after all, but perhaps, more importantly, because the slum dwellers of Delhi who had delivered AAP its electoral victory (see Ramani 2013) were much more interested in having the AAP in power to continue delivering subsidized water and electricity than they were in the Ombudsman bill.

The people's movement trajectory

Hence though the AAP started off in a "middle-class" vein, it soon realized that to broaden its constituency and spread beyond Delhi's middle class, it would also need to include a different section of the Indian population—a section that might sometimes like to think of itself part of the "middle class" but experiences enough daily forms of social and economic exclusion for this fantasy to remain extremely fragile (Zabiliute 2014b). It became useful then for the AAP to posit the "common man" identification less as a distinction from the corrupt handful of "high-worth

Indians living in poverty. For accompanying India's 9 percent average growth rate in the 1990s is the fact that income inequalities in India have doubled in the liberalization era (Jayadev et. al 2007) and the 60 percent poorest of the Indian population in fact consume almost as much—or we should say as little—today as they did at the beginning of the 1990s (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2012). Many rural poor have migrated to urban India in pursuit of a better future only to find it impossible to get a steady foothold in the city: much of India's neoliberal growth is jobless, relying on accumulation by dispossession. Partha Chatterjee (2008) has characterized the changed relationship between India's poor and the state by arguing that where earlier the political hegemony of the Indian state rested on its claims to being the vanguard of an enlightened, modern project of national development—with combating poverty being the most important legitimation for industrialization—nowadays, instead, political hegemony has shifted so that it is now legitimate for the state to prioritize growth above all. And yet a barrage of welfare programs has also emerged in the past two decades to try to "reverse the effects of primitive accumulation" (Chatterjee 2008). In other words, the poor in India are no longer the legitimation of national economic policymaking but instead are being managed through increasingly technologically savvy (but hardly thereby more effective) welfare programs on anything from the right to food to access to medical insurance. The largest and most famous of the schemes is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act that the Congress government introduced in 2005, partly in an attempt to stem the migration of the poor to the cities.

These schemes in themselves, though they can obviously be read as neoliberal policymaking, have not simply sprang up as an automatic function of a capitalist system trying to stabilize itself: they have been shaped by the social movements pushing for them, and have often thereby gotten a more radical or generous content than they otherwise would have. Since 1992, the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) has brought together many of these social movements. What is interesting is that this alliance—under the leadership of Medha Patkar, well known for heading the resistance against the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River—decided in a meeting with AAP representatives in January 2014 to lend its "active support" to the party. Moreover, some prominent leaders of movements who are part of the NAPM, notably Medha Patkar herself and Babu Mathews, former director of ActionAid and a well-known labor activist, even took the step of becoming AAP candidates themselves. The move should be read against the background of longer-term dynamics in the field of social movements in India—and elsewhere in the global South—where many of the people's movements of the

resistance (n.b. the Maoists) or sustained themselves with international donor funding. The latter path usually entailed becoming either NGO-ized or at least maintaining a parallel NGO identity and shifting between the people's movement and NGO form according to political and legal contextual requirements. This development has also gone accompanied with a juridification of protest where NGOs-cum-people's movements concentrated a lot of their energy on fighting court battles and pushing for new laws—including new laws enabling more effective legal activism such as the Right to Information Act.

In the 2000s, a key process in the NGO field became the decrease in international donor funding, as with India's "emerging market" status, the Indian state increasingly wants to be known solely as a "trade partner" and not as a recipient of aid. In 2003, a number of smaller European donors—the Netherlands and Denmark, for instance—were "relieved" of their role in India (see de Groot et al. 2008), and the decrease of funding became drastically felt by the NGOs-cum-people's movements. Many of their leaders have therefore developed political ambitions to secure an alternative source of legal survival and potential resource mobilization. Many now consider it crucial to have a foothold in politics to protect their movement. And as the momentum of the alter-globalist movement waned, arguments against entering politics came to be seen as misguided or even hypocritical. This is the context in which NAPM in 2004 announced the creation of the People's Political Front (PPF). And this is also the context in which the many personal initiatives of movement leaders to engage with politics should be read, including, for instance, Christina Swamy—the former NGO program coordinator I knew from my fieldwork—who in April 2006 formed the Women's Political Front in Tamil Nadu to channel her feminist and antimafia activism toward "an alternative political force that could replace the male-dominated, corrupt political system."

The ideological justification for the creation of the PPF resonates a lot with the claims of the AAP today. Already in 2004, Medha Patkar emphasized the pervasiveness of corruption and the corporate sponsorship of electoral politics—"with big industrial houses financing and controlling parties"—as a key problem prompting the people's movements to present an alternative. The PPF aimed to "challenge the changed culture of politics that is criminal and communal to a large extent, which brings not just religion but caste as a force, to carry on the game of numbers" (Patkar 2004). Against such opportunistic manipulation, Patkar advocated the "values, sincerity, and commitment" of the people's movements, just as today the AAP juxtaposes its ethical commitment with the corrupt "vote-banking" of the political class. Of course, there is a thin line between effectively rejecting

and the AAP and the NAPM have therefore received similar critiques from Dalit activists. The point I want to make though is that Patkar's backing of the Anna Hazare movement—and later the AAP—is not all that surprising and, moreover, cannot be read as a story of naïve co-optation or selling out on the part of the NAPM. Instead, it is the joining of two political currents that already had strong similarities, although the NAPM was more decidedly leftist than the AAP and, in negotiating the terms of the cooperation, pushed the AAP to the left.

The leftist orientation of the NAPM leadership follows its Marxist-inspired political education in the late '60s and '70s and the fact that these leaders, though usually not of poor or lower-caste background themselves, have built their legitimacy and power through the struggles of the poor that they managed to mobilize and that they represent. Their personal power and discourse is markedly different from that of the managerial-cum-moralistic party builders of the "middle-class" ideological stream within the AAP. This is not to say they are altogether Gramscian "organic intellectuals," but their attitude toward the ordinary people they try to mobilize is one of trying to educate them about the structural power relations impeding on their lives and the need to stand united against them—it goes much beyond the neoliberal effort of merely educating poor people on the simple practical or behavioral solutions that stand in between their current condition and their entry into the middle class. These movement leaders wouldn't be what they are, moreover, if they didn't have a tactical vision and the ability to negotiate political outcomes. Swamy described the decision of the NAPM to support the AAP as a carefully negotiated process that the activists entered into with the clear understanding that they would only agree if the concerns of India's poor—and not just "corruption"—would be a determining factor in the AAP's political priorities: "Arvind [Kejriwal] came and we had many questions: is this going to be only about corruption, or is this also a people's struggle?" When the AAP leadership agreed to their terms, however, they decided "yes, we will join in initiating this new party," in the hope that joining their strengths—the visibility and urban appeal of India Against Corruption leaders with the experience and rural grounding of the NAPM leaders—would allow for an effective change of the political system in favor of India's poor. In interviews with the media, Patkar (Koppikar 2014) likewise described the AAP as a medium to get political traction for the agenda of the marginalized and dispossessed and emphasized that, despite the AAP's public middle-class orientation, PPF activists had been active in drawing up the substance of the AAP's vision and policy documents.

Concluding reflections

will conclude with two reflections: one concerning what the effect will be on the AAP, the other concerning the meaning of this involvement in light of Indian politics in general. As for the first question, the AAP clearly seems to have been moving leftward since its inception, and the fact that it reached out to include people's movements is both a reflection and strengthening of this trend. Though it still caters rhetorically to the middle class, the AAP makes sure to set this middle class off against the corrupt super-elite rather than against a whole gamut of "corrupt" players that would potentially include the informal poor. At the same time, its campaigns consistently and prominently include the bread and butter issues that are of greatest concern to the poor. Deciding whether this populist mix of middle-class rhetoric and concern for the interests of the excluded and dispossessed of neoliberal India effectively constitutes a nascent emancipatory, counterhegemonic force is difficult, but in this light it is perhaps encouraging to see that the Mumbai stock market tends to register AAP popularity as a threat: whereas the Mumbai stock market "sizzled," as newspapers headlines put it, when Modi came to power, it tends to drop dramatically when electoral victories of the AAP threaten and "the Common Man takes on India's elite," as a *Financial Times* headline put it. The nervousness of the power block behind India's neoliberal growth path can also be seen in measures taken against the AAP by Mukesh Ambani, the richest man of India and—as we saw in the introduction—a popular target of AAP campaigns. Since Modi's election, this owner of much of India's telecommunication and media networks has gained further influence and uses this to instruct media channels to ignore the AAP in their coverage. This attempted corporate media censure could be another sign that the AAP is indeed a potential threat to the brutality of accumulation by dispossession in India and could even constitute a blessing in disguise for those committed to pushing the AAP further leftward as media censure may wane the AAP leadership of its search for spectacular middle-class media attention and strengthen its efforts to reach the poor majority.

Unfortunately, I cannot, however, end on this positive note regarding the AAP without also putting this conclusion into perspective by asking what these dynamics within the AAP mean in light of the emancipatory/countercapitalist potential in Indian politics in general today. First of all, ironically, the AAP's leftward shift has in the short term probably contributed to the growing political hegemony of the right in India: seen in purely electoral terms, the fact that the AAP shifted leftward meant many of the middle-class sympathizers who would have earlier voted for it ended up voting for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) instead (Hensman 2014), supporting Modi's electoral victory in the competition for the most effec-

think of these issues beyond electoral calculation, more in terms of political hegemony, we may reach some even more disturbing conclusions. For with Modi's hold on power—his active reshaping of media discourse and aggressive crackdown on the left, and the poor in general, in the name of combating Maoist terror—the populism of the AAP may end up being the only critical discourse still possible at all. This possibility can be seen also in the fact that in some regions, explicit anticapitalist activists, including Maoists, feel their only chance of political survival is to join the AAP even if they feel alienated by its populism. This would mean the populist limits of the AAP's critique of Indian politics and society will become the limits of political discourse in general. It means that poverty can only be articulated as a failure of government "service delivery" and that dispossession is an outcome of "crony capitalism," a perversion of an otherwise good capitalism. In India today there exist structural conditions that favor a populist politics over conscious forms of class struggle as labor has become increasingly fragmented, dispersed, and further informalized and as people use "a precarious mix of livelihood strategies to make ends meet" (Corbridge and Shah 2013). In this context, it is all the more understandable that leftist activists feel the need to engage with populist politics. The turn to subvert an initially right-wing populism for leftist purposes within the AAP simultaneously, however, represents a further right-wing hegemonization of Indian politics in general.

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